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Session 1C

Western Research Network on Education and Training

Réseau de Recherche de l'Ouest sur l'Éducation et la Formation Professionnelle

...The Link Between Educational Provision, Processes and Outcomes

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Literacy Research and Policy Development: Mapping the Dominant Discourses[1]

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Discourse analysis reveals how the meanings of literacy are both socially produced and variable between different discourses. A recent consultation with researchers is used to demonstrate how the outcomes were influenced by the discourses of participants and organizers. An argument is made to establish a literacy discourse analysis tradition to make effective use of existing knowledge, assist those without a policy voice to be heard at the table, and to democratize and legitimize policy development processes.

Adult literacy in Canada, as in other technologically advanced countries, is a focus for public literacy policy. The high level of attention now paid to literacy has emerged over three decades of public debate around economic, social and technological changes associated with the new global economy. New manufacturing technologies and electronic information communications systems, which require relatively high literacy, have replaced many mass production processes of the post World-War II era that required relatively low levels of literacy. Not only has the nature of work changed in many occupations but in some sectors of the economy a number of new occupations requiring specialized kinds of literacy have emerged. Consequently it is widely accepted that the possession of literacy skills is more important to the economy than ever before (Hardwick, 1996) and literacy is commodified in the education and training sectors as a vocational skill for the new economy. Employers now demand that all employees have higher levels of literacy and communications skills, although there are differences of

[1] The WRNET conference session will be a forum to discuss the project's goals and consider possibilities to extend discourse analysis research through linkages with other literacy research projects

opinion about the evidence presented to justify these demands (Livingstone, 1999).

This overarching context of rapid economic, workplace and social change has stimulated production of adult literacy research and new debates over definitions and understandings of literacy, the social value and applications of literacy, and public literacy policy and practices. However, it is apparent that economic issues have been in the foreground of literacy debates while equity issues have been relegated to the sidelines.

Targeted funds to support literacy research have recently been allocated by the National Literacy Secretariat (NLS) and the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) and professional associations including, among others, the Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education (CASAE) and the Canadian Society for the Study of Education (CSSE) have been requested by the NLS to propose a national literacy research agenda. The NLS has also initiated a number of literacy policy dialogues around the outcomes of national literacy surveys conducted by Statistics Canada. These initiatives are ostensibly to foster research which will more clearly identify national, regional and community literacy needs; contribute to new literacy programming initiatives; improve literacy education practices, and inform public social and labour market policy development. It is assumed by some proponents of these initiatives, and clearly stated by others, that the current literacy knowledge base is inadequate for these purposes and an impediment to a rapid improvement in the adult population's literacy.

Responses to the call for research, policy consultations and the ongoing public debates sustained by these activities are influenced by and also contribute to the prevailing literacy discourses. However, the extent to which the research production and dissemination processes and policy formation

are influenced by particular discourses and their embedded ideologies has not been fully explored. It is not known, for example, to what extent, literacy discourses influence:

- the use of existing research to inform policy development, design programs and improve practice,
- policy makers and program planners perceptions of knowledge gaps, and
- the production and dissemination of research findings to the advantage of certain interest groups and the disadvantage of others.

Discourse and Ideology

Discourse analysis, as applied in this project, has its origins in the work of Foucault (1980) who recognized discourse as expressive human behaviors, the language, written and oral, used by people in institutions and social and cultural contexts to convey meanings and purposes; to construct knowledge and commonsense understandings of their realities, and to make claims to truth and power. Since Foucault, van Dijk (1998) and Fairlough (1995) among many others (See the anthology by Jaworski & Coupland, 1999) have demonstrated how discourses incorporate images, practices and language which not only circulate and prescribe meanings, but also exert influence, and are an instrument of power used to exclude and dominate. Discourses are a means of exerting social authority to determine whose interests will prevail and who will be privileged in particular social contexts. Discourses become institutionalized as discursive formations, instrumental and strategic uses of language and practices which may be hidden from, or invisible to those who are subjected to their effects, and possibly even to some who use them.

Ideology, like discourse, is not easily defined. An ideology is not simply a list of beliefs and expressed values, rather it is a contained set of

"fundamental coordinates of social groups" and their sustaining conditions (van Dijk, 1998, pp. 53) which are structured to define: membership in a group; the group's goals, activities, values and norms; its social position and group relations, and a group's needed resources. For example a labour workplace literacy ideology may identify group members as male employees, their work as the fabrication of steel frames, their goals as employment retention, their values as working class, their relations with others in terms of organized labour activities, and their resources as worker solidarity, union funds and contractual benefits.

Ideology functions as an organizing and interpretive system used by groups to observe and interpret realities as they navigate a safe passage through the cultural, political and economic institutions of their society. Unlike a set of coordinates on a chart, ideologies are not fixed, instead they can shift and evolve to set new interpretations and alternate courses. Frequently ideology functions to frame views and steer courses without group members being conscious of its role as a social navigation system.

Embedded in discourse, ideology functions as a taken-for-granted level of understanding in daily communications and social transactions, that is as a form of common sense (Hebdidge, 1993). Ideology serves to normalize a groups' beliefs, actions, values and goals; to define who belongs and who doesn't; to declare what is acceptable and what is deviant; and to construct the categories essential for the processes used by groups to exert social control and dominance.

Policy analysts, educators and actors representing mainstream interests, dominant culture and social class, frequently refer to the term, *ideology*, pejoratively. They dismiss those with whom they disagree by categorizing them as ideologues and activists. Existing policy consultation processes are frequently flawed because those who claim not to be ideologically committed

impose their views as normative and represent alternate views from groups such as, for example, the undereducated and lower literate and those who work in literacy education to attain equity and social change goals, as ideological. The ability to determine whose discourses are heard and included in policy debates and whose discourses are marginalized and stigmatized is an important aspect of policy formation process. My argument is that greater attention needs to be paid to recognizing power imbalances in literacy debates. I argue for discourse analysis as an important means to understanding the ineffectiveness of certain research to influence policy makers and the present imbalance between economic and social values in the current literacy debates. Discourse analysis recognizes that all debating positions are embedded with ideologies, consequently all discourses can be legitimately included in meta analyses and policy background reviews and subjected to the same analytic treatment procedures. The policy development process is therefore enhanced and democratized.

Purpose of the Study

This paper offers a brief analysis of a *Literacy Research Dialogue* to demonstrate how discourse analysis reveals ideologies and interests of groups engaged in literacy debates. From this analysis I conclude that a long term, participatory project is needed to map the discourses and ideologies influencing literacy research production and dissemination. If public investments in literacy research are to meet the broad multifaceted needs of society, rather than the narrow interests of particular groups, a better understanding of the origins and influence of literacy's formative discourses is needed. Further, a critical analysis of literacy discourses is a step towards assessing current literacy research and policy efforts and democratizing the process by making transparent the agendas of all actors.

Method

There are a number of discourse analysis methods ranging from linguistic analyses to critical inquiry, each contributing understandings and insights into a discourse's complexities (See Jaworski & Couplan, 1999). My choice of method, reflecting personal experience and professional interest in literacy program and policy development, is critical discourse analysis, probing texts and discourse practices to make explicit underlying meanings, assumptions and structures in order to reveal the operations of influence and power.

The NLS, CSSE and CASAE *Literacy Research Dialogue*

I first began to think in depth about the need for an analysis of literacy discourses at the joint CSSE and CASAE *Literacy Research Dialogue* (See Racicot & Hebert, 1998), organized with the support of the NLS, and held at the University of Ottawa during the 1998 Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences. The meeting was a focused discussion around the need for a research community in the field of adult literacy. Three sub themes were identified for discussion: the research community, research dissemination and the research enterprise. As I listened and participated in the discussions as Chair of one of two working groups, I was aware of a range of differences in the experiences, values and beliefs among the participants which covertly shaped and influenced the discussions. Some of the differences were related to participants' research traditions and working knowledge base. It became evident to me, and was confirmed at a similar meeting at The University of Sherbrooke in 1999, that participants in the dialogues are strongly influenced by different literacy discourses and ideologies. Using my own notes, session recorders' notes and the final report of the 1998 dialogue (Racicot & Hebert, 1998) I analyzed participants' statements for assumptions, beliefs and values to make explicit participants understandings of literacy and literacy research

and to assess whether, and how, the discourses influenced their contributions to the dialogue.

A) Literacy Researchers' Oral Discourses[2]

My analysis of the discussions reveals that social science research traditions and paradigms are firmly embedded within, and powerful components of, participants' discourses. The quantitative and qualitative research paradigms in particular, operate ideologically to shape researchers' creation and use of literacy definitions, influence the knowledge they value and direct their attention to particular research topics. Framed and communicated within a literacy discourse, the paradigms circulate in literacy forums and ultimately influence the acceptance of research outcomes resulting in differential patterns of literacy research dissemination, inclusion in policy discussions, and usage for improving literacy education practices.

The major interest for many participants was not to contribute to public policy formation. Many contributions to the discussions reflected an "educator ideology", a benign, neutral and "conservative common-sense" position that values building knowledge to improve practice. In other words the dominant discourse was normative, institutional and pedagogical with the individual at the centre. Literacy discussions from this perspective help to reproduce social roles, values and institutions. This discourse communicates the mandates and agendas of government agencies and public education institutions, focuses on applied research, instructional practices, and serves to strengthen linkages among established literacy organizations. Other discourses which challenge "literacism", prejudices based on language use and knowledge, were largely excluded from consideration by participants in the context of the formal dialogue.

[2] Space and time limits prevent the reporting of detailed evidence to substantiate my claims and interpretations in this paper.

The dominant literacy research discourse, as revealed at this event, is normative and constraining and influences researchers' relations with the community and organizations in civil society, with government and public education institutions, and with the market and representatives of business and labour. During exchanges about topics including family, workplace and social change literacies, participants' statements expressed normatively held values and beliefs instilled with broad social, political and cultural functions. Taken as common-sense, speakers seemed unaware of their assumptions about the function of literacy in supporting a raced, classed and gendered view of Canadian society. For example, one discussion around the needs of child care providers in a community revealed that the gendered and racialized roles of the immigrant women concerned were ignored in an analysis of their literacy needs while normative child rearing practices and immigrant adjustment requirements to meet employers' needs were considered.

Exchanges among researchers also revealed discourse complexities and contradictions that passed without critical comment. For example, some researchers who focused on family literacy did so without acknowledging how their prior experience in schools and other formal education contexts had made them aware of factors which contribute to future adults having low levels of literacy. While single female parents were identified as a target population for literacy programming the heterosexual, male-head, nuclear family structure was most frequently assumed and not explicitly questioned. Their experience in family literacy as one area of research work remained compartmentalized and separated from other experiences within narrow conceptions of professional influence, practice and institutional mandates.

The majority of participants were women and women's literacy needs were highlighted on several occasions during the discussions. However, while the interests of equity, poverty and marginalized groups were also

acknowledged the discussion and suggestions for future research reflected a focus on the individual learner rather than the structural barriers facing these groups and a consideration of the role of literacy for initiating and sustaining social equity and change. The discourse of the public educator revealed her to be focused on the individual learner decontextualized in terms of family, class relations and community contexts. This discourse ultimately supports a blame-the-victim perspective and prescriptive literacy curricula and pedagogies.

B) The *Literacy Research Dialogue* Report

The written report of the *Literacy Research Dialogue* (Racicot & Hebert, 1998) presents a detailed account of the event's origins, significance and implementation. Background documents from the NLS and CSSE are appended to the report. The report's authors relied on the notes of observers appointed to the working groups, the group chairpersons, and the comments of key observers to prepare their summation and statement of outcomes. Exchanges of drafts of the final report among the resource persons ensured consensus that all important observations were included in the final report. In several important respects the strategy used to record participants' contributions to the discussion and prepare the final report is typical of the practice used by many agencies. Distribution of the report, electronically and in print, by the NLS and the two associations completed the accountability and dissemination processes necessary for the report to be used within the larger NLS project to strengthen Canadian literacy research, practice and policy.

The report is written and organized to provide readers with a clear understanding of the event's context, process and outcomes. Details of topics that arose in discussions are succinctly reported in the objective language of government agencies and academe. The authors focus on inclusion rather than critique and analysis as their goal is to ensure participants' ideas and

perspectives are included in the report regardless of which, or the number of, participants who contributed them. In this respect the values of inclusion, respect for the opinions of others, interdisciplinarity and non-judgmental management of the process are reflected throughout the document. One strategy used by the authors to attain a coherent and inclusive listing of the domain of discussed topics is to rephrase participants' statements as questions and combine items contributed by a number of speakers. For example, where a participant might have said,[3] "Instructors and teachers involved in research don't have any interest in the politics of literacy, they don't examine how programs are serving the economy rather than the community", the report reads, " Are literacy researchers aware of the politics of literacy, particularly those discourses around the global economy, new work, deskilling and work-place literacy, etc.?" (Racicot & Hebert, 1998, pg. 11). The result of this strategy is that ideas and statements are stripped of any contextual language and terms that have the potential to influence a reader's valuing or interpretation of the statements. The use of language throughout the report reflects the authors' intentions to maximize inclusiveness and to legitimate participants' contributions to the dialogue. Verbatim statements and language that might have characterized respondents in particular ways, or carried connotations or values with the potential to colour the reading of the topic under discussion are excluded from the report. An ethnographic concern for careful representation of voice is replaced with ideologically influenced concerns for inclusion and objectivity.

The report, in my opinion, serves as a good example of the writing expected by agencies engaged in public consultation. The goal of the consultation process is to document a diverse group's ideas without unduly promoting either cohesion or difference among the participants. A panel of experts is used later to review the outcomes and prepare policy discussion documents. By ensuring that each person's view is heard and recorded

[3] The following is not a verbatim statement from the meeting.

participants' concerns about the role of gatekeepers and the possibility that some voices will be privileged over others are minimized. However, frequently an anonymous review panel re-reads the decontextualized and objectified report in a context removed from the public consultation process.

An example of politically mediated influence on this kind of public consultation process in education occurred in Saskatchewan when, following a province wide consultation on the goals of the provincial curriculum, and after the outcomes of public meetings around the province had been published, Ministry of Education officials plagiarized a US study to list the proposed goals for Saskatchewan public education (See Cochrane, 1987). As a willing participant in the *Literacy Research Dialogue* my purpose here is not to impugn the motives of the NLS staff, the report's authors, or other participants, rather I wish to point out the ease with which privileged persons in the policy analysis process have the opportunity and proclivity to reproduce their own text (discourse) from the documents they work with. The Saskatchewan example demonstrates how discursive practices are inextricably linked to power relations which must be challenged if policy analysis is to become a more democratic enterprise. This example supports my argument that literacy discourse analysis may help to reduce the possibility that textually mediated discourses can go undetected in influencing or possibly invalidating policy development processes.

Discussion

The discourses of specialized groups such as adult literacy researchers differ from those of literacy learners, instructors or business managers. What is important here however, is not that researchers have different discourses, but in the process of initiating new literacy research and organizing knowledge to better inform policy development, the discourses of researchers themselves need to be examined alongside those of other groups. According to Weedon:

> How we live our lives as conscious thinking subjects, and how we give meaning to the material social relations under which we live and which structure our everyday lives, depends on the range and social power of existing discourses, our access to them and the political strength of the interests which they represent (Weedon, 1987, pg. 26).

From this perspective conflicting accounts of the extent and impact of functional illiteracy inform different commonsense assumptions about people's subjectivities and social roles. Business managers may tend to see adult illiteracy in the workforce as a consequence of individuals' complacency while community literacy instructors may tend to see a lack of literacy skills as structurally determined. Some discourses justify the status quo while others challenge it, sometimes from within, but more frequently from outside an organization or institution. A dominant discourse operates hegemonically by marginalizing other articulators of a counter hegemonic perspective by exerting institutional, class, race and gender relations of power.

Locating and Studying Literacy Discourses

Discourses are located in public and private spaces. The mass media is the most powerful institution for disseminating popular cultural knowledge and values and the single most influential public space for producing and receiving written and oral literacy discourses. One example of media based literacy discourse is the Southam Press' coverage of that organization's privately conducted national literacy survey (Southam Press, 1987). The meetings of academics, business associations, literacy practitioners and civil society's representatives are less public locations. Also less accessible than the mass media are the textual discourses of engaged groups conveyed through newsletters, journals, magazines and most recently computer web sites. To broaden the policy debate and to study the use being made of existing literacy research the numerous sites of literacy discourses need to be identified and studied.

In the 1970's following publication of Tough's work on adult learning projects (Tough, 1971) literally hundreds of researchers, many of whom were graduate students, replicated Tough's original study to claim extensive new ground for adult learners. The adult learning project literature quickly accumulated to dispel any doubts about the reality of lifelong learning as an important social phenomenon and to confirm that the great majority of adult learning occurs in informal rather than formal settings. I suggest that should literacy discourse analysis be undertaken in a similar populist manner, a research tradition would be established that might, a) bring existing unrecognized research into a policy context, b) enable previously unrecognized groups to have a policy voice, and c) bring greater legitimacy and democracy to literacy policy consultation processes.

Facilitating a New Research Agenda

Broad goals for a critical discourse analysis focus in literacy research can be proposed without limiting the possibilities for other methods of discourse to be included in the long term project. However, in this paper I have argued that incorporating a critical discourse analysis, in particular, into publicly funded literacy research would help to:

- Reveal how existing literacy texts and research influence our consciousness and objectify our experience of literacy,
- Create a research framework for meta analyses of existing quantitative and qualitative literacy research,
- Democratize the policy development process by outlining the ideologies, discursive practices and interests of organizations and groups participating in literacy debates in Canada,
- Identify important locations of literacy discourses beyond the mass media and to document the means by which the discourses and their embedded

ideologies are produced, reproduced and communicated from these sites, and

- Raise the consciousness of instructors, programmers, trainers, researchers and policy analysts around the influence of discourses on interpretations and valuing of literacy.

Conclusion

Engaging in critical discourse analysis will help to mitigate the present tendency of policy discussions leaning towards discourses which seek literacy education for *Homo economicus*, an actor whose salient criterion is an economic calculus, and who is educated for productive roles in the commercial world (Daly & Cobb, 1988). Understanding how discourses operate and by making their underlying ideologies explicit will help to inform policy research and bring a broader range of research studies into the policy domain. The NLS recognizes that public literacy policy needs to address a broader range of needs than the technical-rational needs of the labour market and the economy. Critical literacy discourse analysis makes clear how power operates to position various discourses of literacy in policy debates and structurally unequal ways such that certain dominant groups continue to disproportionately influence the policy making process. Understanding literacy discourses can help facilitate new debates leading to policies which can sustain literacy education for *Homo literatus*, an actor who thinks as person-in-community; one who recognizes adults' multiple roles in society including work roles; values person-within-community relations, and emphasizes society over market interests (Blunt, 2000).

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